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ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted in which perceptions of an individual responding to an initial disclosure were examined. Observer subjects (N=315) read a brief description of a first encounter between two women. During the meeting one of the women made either an intimate or a non-intimate disclosure (low vs. high initial intimacy). The other woman responded in one of five ways: with an intimate disclosure (high-return-disclosure), a non-intimate disclosure (low-return-disclosure), acknowledgement and sympathy (concern), concern-plus-high-return-disclosure, or concern-plus-low-return-disclosure. Regardless of initial intimacy, the most favorable impressions of the respondent were formed in the "concern" condition. When the respondent made a disclosure of her own, the interaction predicted by the normative hypothesis was replicated. Results indicate there is a possibility that a disclosure reciprocity norm may not apply to conversations. (Author)

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Disclosure or Concern: A Look at Liking for Norm-Breakers

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Disclosure or Concern: A Look at
Liking for Norm-Breakers

According to Altman (1973) two major theoretical approaches have been advanced to account for the consistent finding of disclosure reciprocity. The first of these, which is most closely identified with Jourard (1959) and Worthy, Gary, and Kahn (1969), may be loosely described as a reinforcement-social exchange explanation. It holds that the receipt of intimate disclosure is reinforcing. Reciprocity occurs as a result of the recipient's feeling that he has been trusted and now wishes to reward the revealer with a confidence of his or her own. The second explanation, articulated by Derlega and Chaikin and their associates (e.g., Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Derlega, Harris, & Chaikin, 1973; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976), views reciprocity in terms of social norms. Reciprocity is said to be the result of the social obligation to reciprocate behaviors. It should be noted that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Viewing disclosure reciprocity as the product of norms does not mean that questions of trust and/or the reward value of received disclosure will not arise. Similarly, explaining disclosure reciprocity as a social exchange process does not mean that social norms are irrelevant. Altman has noted that neither position is well developed theoretically or empirically.

To make further progress in explaining disclosure reciprocity, researchers must direct their attention toward determining what is actually being reciprocated in an exchange of disclosures. A recent study by Morton (1978) categorizes disclosure in terms of two separate dimensions, descriptive and evaluative intimacy. Descriptive intimacy refers to the revelation of private facts about oneself. Evaluative intimacy, on the other hand, involves the conveying of judgment and affect. Although the two dimensions are sometimes

confounded in manipulations of disclosure, researchers have tended to focus almost exclusively on descriptive intimacy.

Chaikin and Derlega's (1974) liking for the norm-breaker experiment, for example, employed disclosures consisting primarily of private facts at differing levels of intimacy. The experiment was a 2 x 2 design in which observer subjects first read a low or high intimacy disclosure made by one woman to another. Then they watched the recipient respond with either a low or high intimacy disclosure. It was predicted and found that attraction for the recipient was greatest when she matched the intimacy of the initial revealer. These results have become an important source of support for the normative approach to reciprocity. They are also consistent with the correspondent inference theory of Jones and Davis (1965) in that subject's views of the respondent's dispositional disclosure tendencies were affected by expectancies based on the intimacy of the initial revealer.

In interpreting their results, Chaikin and Derlega imply that only by matching the original revealer fact for fact can the recipient satisfy the norm. Is the norm really that specific?

Informal observation suggests that self-disclosures are met with a variety of responses. Indeed, a common reaction to hearing about an intimate problem in another's life is to express concern or sympathy. Experience suggests that such a reaction in which evaluative rather than descriptive intimacy is reciprocated may be acceptable and appropriate. If so, then the norm of reciprocity may be less specific than Chaikin and Derlega imply. Instead of requiring participants in an interaction to match each other fact for fact, it may only prescribe that intimacy be met with intimacy.

The present experiment was devised to compare the reactions of observers to a disclosure recipient who responded to a low or high intimacy disclosure of private facts with either low or high intimate disclosure of her own or with an expression of concern. It was predicted that an expression of concern as well as a disclosure of matching intimacy would be seen as appropriate and lead to attraction.

Method

Subjects

Three hundred fifteen introductory psychology students (males and females) from the University of Texas served as subjects. They participated in partial fulfillment of course requirements and were tested either in their classes or in a group session set up for this purpose. All conditions were run in each of the testing sessions.

Procedure

The experiment was introduced as a study of impression formation. Subjects were each given a test booklet and after indicating their age, sex, and year in school, proceeded to read a description of a first encounter between two women along the same lines as the one described by Chaikin and Derlega (1974). After what was described as a brief conversation during which they discovered that they were both sophomores and interested in communication as a major, one of the women asked the other if anything had been bothering her lately. The other woman (hereafter referred to as the initial revealer or simply the first woman) responded with a self-disclosure of either low or high intimacy. These disclosures were designed with an eye to keeping the negative affective valence of the statement constant across conditions. Also, since both disclosures dealt with depression and alcohol, an identical concern response could be made.

The initial disclosure manipulation. In both low and high initial disclosure conditions the first woman said that she was depressed because everyone was so involved in getting drunk. In the low intimacy condition she went on to say that she had just left a group of friends and getting drunk was all they could talk about. In the high intimacy condition she continued by revealing that her parents were in the process of getting a divorce as a result of her mother's alcoholism.

The response manipulation. The other woman (hereafter referred to as the respondent or the second woman) replied to this in one of five ways. In the low-return disclosure condition (low-return), she mentioned that she had just left a class where the topic of discussion had been beginning a career in communication. She noted that this was difficult but went on to say that if she kept her grades up, she thought she could do it.

In the high-return disclosure condition (high-return), she revealed that she had been upset recently because her boyfriend, who had been living with her for a year, had recently broken off their relationship. She went on to say that she did not like living alone and that it was really hard for her when they ran into each other.

In the concern condition, she indicated sympathy with the first woman, noting that it was probably hard for her to concentrate on her studies. She went on to acknowledge that there probably was nothing she could really do, but offered to listen if the first woman wanted to talk about it.

Finally two combination conditions were run (concern-plus-low-return and concern-plus-high-return), in which the low or high return disclosure followed an initial statement of concern.

Dependent measures. After reading the second woman's reply, subjects' attraction towards the respondent was measured. They were first asked to estimate the extent to which they would like the respondent. Then they rated the respondent on four trait dimensions (warm-cold, adjusted-maladjusted, trusting-not trusting, and trustworthy-untrustworthy). They also rated the intimacy of the statements of both women and the appropriateness of the second woman's behavior, and finally the extent to which the second woman's response was personalistic in nature; that is, caused by the way she felt about the initial revealer.

Results and Discussion

The results from the analyses of the two questions which asked subjects to rate the intimacy of both women's remarks have interesting implications for an attributional approach to self-disclosure. They lend support to a contrast hypothesis of self-disclosure advanced by Taylor (1973). The existence of contrast effects has previously been discussed in terms of attitude change (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), attraction (Aronson & Linder, 1965), and attribution (Jones & McGillis, 1976). In self-disclosure terms, a contrast effect may occur when a disclosure at a given level of intimacy is proceeded or followed by a disclosure at a lower or higher level of intimacy. The contrast between the lower and the higher intimacy disclosures may lead the perceiver to view both as more extreme when they occur in succession than either would appear in a neutral context. For example, one's disclosure of a history of drug abuse may be perceived as more intimate when it comes before or after another's revelation of a history of tennis championships than when it is followed or preceeded by disclosure of more intimate information such as marital problems. Taylor (1973) reports just such an effect. In his study,

subjects rated the intimacy of a confederate who increased the intimacy of his conversations with the subject across trials as higher than that of a confederate who always engaged in intimate conversation. I would like now to discuss our findings regarding attributions of intimacy and the contrast hypothesis.

In the analysis of the attributions of intimacy for the behavior of the first woman, main effects for both initial intimacy and type of response were found. Cell means are presented in Table 1. As expected, the behavior of the first woman was judged to be more intimate when she talked about parental alcoholism and divorce than when she spoke of alcohol use among her friends, thus validating the manipulation of initial intimacy, F (1, 293) = 34.93, $p < .001$. More interesting, though, is the main effect for type of response, F (4, 293) = 3.69, $p < .007$. Subjects saw the behavior of the first woman as more intimate when the response of the second woman was low in intimacy; a contrast effect. The low-return and concern-plus-low-return responses resulted in the first woman's behavior being seen as more intimate than if either the high-return or concern-plus-high-return response were given. In addition to these contrast effects, an effect somewhat akin to assimilation occurred in the concern condition. When the second woman expressed concern, the behavior of the first woman was viewed as more intimate than in the high-return or the concern-plus-high-return conditions. This effect cannot really be considered a contract effect because the second woman's concern response did not differ with the initial disclosure in terms of intimacy. It appears that a statement of concern serves to confirm or verify the intimacy of the initial revealer's statement.

Analysis of intimacy ratings of the second woman's reponse revealed first a highly significant main effect for type of response, F (4, 295) = 38.07, $p < .001$. As noted above, the concern, the high-return, and the concern-plus-high-return responses were seen as equally intimate. These three responses were all seen as more intimate than the concern-plus-low-return response. In turn, concern-plus-low-return was seen as more intimate than the low-return response alone. These differences between perceptions of the low- and high-return disclosures serve to validate the manipulation of the respondent's intimacy.

Some evidence for contrast effects can also be found in the rated intimacy of the second woman's behavior. An initial intimacy by type of response interaction was found, F (4, 295) = 2.46, $p < .05$, which was due primarily to the fact that the low-return response was seen as less intimate when the initial disclosure was high in intimacy than when it was of low intimacy.

Finally, an interaction between sex of subject and type of response was found, F (4, 295) = 4.31, $p < .003$. There was a tendency on the part of males to rate the low-return response, which involved getting a start in one's chosen profession, as more intimate than females. Females, on the other hand, viewed the high-return response which involved breaking up with a boyfriend as more intimate than did males. Incidentally, this was the only one of our dependent variables on which sex of subject was found to exert any reliable influence.

I would like to turn now to the major focus of the study, the effects of the different types of responses on attraction and their implications for a normative account of reciprocity. Two attraction measures were computed:

a liking index was formed by summing subjects' responses to the question asking them to predict how much the initial revealer would like the respondent and responses to a question asking them how much they would like the respondent. An alternative attraction measure was formed by summing subjects' ratings of the second woman on the four trait or impression items.

Considering the liking index first, means for which appear in Table 3, an analysis of variance revealed a highly significant main effect for type of response, F (4, 293) = 16.80, $p < .001$. The second woman was liked more in the concern condition than in any of the other four, and more in the concern-plus-high-return and concern-plus-low-return than in either of the conditions in which high or low descriptive disclosure occurred alone. In addition, an interaction between initial intimacy and type of response was found, F (4, 293) = 3.74, $p < .007$. The low-return response led to greater liking when it followed a low intimacy than a high intimacy disclosure. If the initial disclosure was high in intimacy, a high-return response was preferred to the low-return one. In the multiple conditions, a concern-plus-high-return response resulted in greater liking when it followed high disclosure than when it followed low.

Cell means for the impression measure are displayed in Table 4. They follow the same pattern as the liking index. Once again, a highly significant main effect for type of response is found, F (4, 294) = 27.48, $p < .001$. Again we find concern alone resulting in greater attraction than any of the combinations of responses, and the combinations in turn leading to greater attraction than either the high-return or low-return response alone. On the impression index, however, the high-return response resulted in more favorable ratings in general than the low-return response.

Also on the impression index, we again found an interaction between initial intimacy and type of response, F (4, 294) = 8.07, $p < .001$. Here as with the liking index, a low-return response resulted in greater attraction when it followed low than when it followed high intimacy disclosure and if initial disclosure was high in intimacy a high-return response resulted in greater attraction than a low-return one. Also in agreement with the liking measure, the concern-plus-high-return response resulted in greater attraction when it followed high intimacy as compared to low intimacy disclosure. After high disclosure it was preferred to a high-return alone.

In evaluating the implications of this data for a normative hypothesis of self-disclosure the most appropriate place to begin is with the question asking subjects to rate the appropriateness of the second woman's response. The analysis of the responses to this question revealed effects that parallel those of the two attraction indices (see Table 5). The initial intimacy by type of response interaction, F (4, 295) = 3.14, $p < .02$, was again due to the fact that the low-return response was preferred after low as compared to high initial disclosure, and that the concern-plus-high-return response was seen as more appropriate after high as compared to low disclosure. The highly significant main effect for type of response, however, F (4, 295) = 10.76, $p < .001$, indicates clearly that subjects viewed the concern response as the most appropriate of any regardless of initial intimacy level. The addition of either high- or low-return disclosure to the statement of concern actually resulted in the response being viewed as less appropriate, although it was still seen as more appropriate than high- or low-return disclosure without the statement of concern.

To what extent do these data offer support for disclosure norms? The strong version of the normative hypothesis, which requires that the recipient of private facts respond by revealing private facts about him- or herself, is weakened by our finding that a statement of concern is seen as more appropriate and results in greater attraction than high- or low-return disclosure regardless of initial intimacy level. A weaker version of this normative hypothesis would hold that what must be reciprocated is intimacy of some variety, but not necessarily descriptive intimacy. The data from the present study suggest that some qualification of even this weaker hypothesis is necessary. The concern, the high-return disclosure, and the concern-plus-high-return responses were all seen as equally intimate. If intimacy alone is the only significant factor in responding to self-disclosure, then these three conditions should also have been seen as equally appropriate and have led to equal amounts of attraction. But they do not.

One possible explanation might be that the concern response is seen as more personalistic, and thus more gratifying. That this is not the case is indicated by the results from the question asking subjects to estimate whether the respondent's behavior was influenced more by her basic personality or by her feelings about the first woman (personalism). The analysis of this question revealed a significant main effect, F (4, 295) = 2.63, $p < .04$. But it was the high-return response which was seen as more personalistic than all other responses except concern-plus-high-return. The other responses did not differ on this measure.

Another possibility is that our subjects were responding on the basis of projections for future interactions in the relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Altman and Taylor postulate that relationships will be viewed in a

favorable light and will progress to the extent that forecasts or projections of future rewards are favorable. While no direct evidence is available from the present study, the fact that the concern response resulted in the respondent's being seen as more warm, more adjusted, more trusting, and more trustworthy implies that future interactions would be expected to be positive. In addition, the concern response indicates a willingness on the part of the respondent to tailor the exchange to the issue at hand. Altman (1973) postulates that such a tendency to see issues through to a conclusion is more likely in well established than beginning relationships.

Many, if not most, laboratory investigations of reciprocity have effectively ruled out the possibility of a concern response. Subjects are generally required to describe themselves, most often on different topics, and prevented from asking questions or commenting on what their partner has said. In discussing the reactions of subjects to receiving disclosure within field settings, however, both Rubin (1975) and Archer and Berg (1978, in press) note that expressions of concern were a common response.

In conclusion, the results of this study extend the attributional concept of contrast effects to observers' perceptions of intimate disclosure between individuals. But more importantly, they take a preliminary step toward understanding what the disclosure reciprocity effect is all about.

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Table 1

Intimacy of Initial Revealer

Initial Intimacy	Type of Response				
	L	H	C	CL	CH
Low	6.74	4.31	5.85	6.47	5.24
High	7.70	7.32	7.81	7.67	6.81

Table 2

Intimacy of Respondent

Initial Intimacy	Type of Response				
	L	H	C	CL	CH
Low	3.89	7.25	6.79	4.77	6.92
High	1.91	6.84	7.29	4.74	6.83

Table 3

Liking for Respondent

Initial Intimacy	Type of Response L	H	C	CL	CH
Low	10.04	8.95	13.24	11.05	9.82
High	7.87	9.71	13.91	11.44	12.20

Table 4

Impressions of Respondent

Initial Intimacy	Type of Response L	H	C	CL	CH
Low	25.89	24.14	32.30	29.52	26.04
High	16.99	23.20	34.68	26.40	29.87

Table 5

Appropriateness of Response

Initial Intimacy	Type of Response				
	L	H	C	CL	CH
Low	4.71	3.23	6.10	4.73	3.74
High	3.34	4.00	7.29	4.89	5.78

Table 5

Appropriateness of Response

Initial Intimacy	Type of Response				
	L	H	C	CL	CH
Low	4.71	3.23	6.10	4.73	3.74
High	3.34	4.00	7.29	4.89	5.78